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NATURALISTS' CORNER

NOTES ON SPITTING BY A RED SPITTING COBRA

Naja Mosambica Pallida

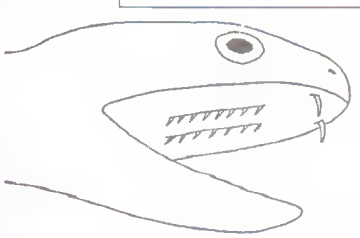
by Stephen Spawls

July/August 1976 EANHS Bulletin

There are two species of Kenyan snakes that are able to spit venom; the Black necked or Common Spitting Cobra *Naja n. nigricollis* and the Red Spitting Cobra *Naja Mosambica Pallida*. Spitting is the squirting of venom under high pressure through the venom ducts at the front of the poison glands. In most venomous snakes these ducts emerge at the tip of the fang, but in these two species the duct is at right angles to the front of the fang, enabling the venom to be squirted forward from the snake's mouth with an action similar to that of a water pistol.

The venom is neurotoxic and is instantly effective if injected into the bloodstream. It has no effect however on the unbroken skin, unless it enters an open cut or the eyes. Spitting appears to be a purely defensive reaction. I have never seen captive cobras use it to secure their prey.

In July 1973 I had a 1 m male Red Cobra in my collection which was collected on the western edge of the Tharaka plain, Meru District, Kenya. He was in good health, and had eaten three Ranid frogs a week previously.



Around 9 am on 18th July, wearing goggles to protect my eyes, I opened the cage to clean it and seized the snake before he had a chance to spit. I removed the snake from the grab, grasping its head with my left hand and lifted him from the cage, coiling his body round my left arm. I rested this arm on the top of the cage, pushed up my goggles and bent forward to lift the water bowl from the cage. In doing so, my unprotected face passed across the snake's line of vision and as I lifted my head he spat directly into my left eye at a range of approximately 30 cm.

Illustration from Poisonous Snakes of Eastern Africa by A & J MacKay

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East Africa Natural History Society (Nature Kenya)

Monday 13 May '02, 5:30 p.m. FORD HALL*,

National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi

Refreshments prior & Town drop off

* Note change of venue from that previously advertised

The AGM will feature concise presentations by Nature Kenya committees and projects

Come meet other members and learn about the progress made over the last year!

JOB VACANCY

Administrative Officer, Africa Division, BirdLife International

BirdLife International is a global partnership of charities working in bird conservation. An Administrative Officer is required from mid-2002. The pasitian will initially be based in the offices of Nature Kenya in Nairobi.

This position will involve administrative and secretarial support work, including: logistics, general office management, contracts, procurement; travel and events co-ordination, correspondence, managing filing and database systems, processing mail and telephone calls, receiving visitors, managing appointments, etc.

The ideal candidate will have: ·administrative and/or secretarial qualifications· at least 5 years relevant experience· in-depth IT experience (Microsoft Word, Excel, Access and Outlook)· excellent use of both written and verbal English·a flair for organisation· able to work well under pressure·handle a wide variety of tasks·a tactful, discreet personality. Fluency in Kiswahili, a working knowledge of French and a commitment to environmental issues are also desirable qualities.

Send a CV and covering letter, with current salary details, to the Executive Director, Nature Kenya *or* The Administrator, BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge CB3 0NA, UK.
E-mail: trish.aspinall@birdlife.org.uk
(fax: +44 (0)1223-277200)

Application deadline: 10 May 2002

REGULAR ACTIVITIES

BIRD RINGING

Meet at the Museum, Nairobi Botanic Garden, at 7:00 a.m. every Thursday.

SUNDAY BIRDWATCH

Members meet at the National Museum, Nairobi, car park at 9:00 a.m. the third Sunday of every month, **i.e. 19 May**. The members decide where to go. Bring lunch

TREE WALK

Guided Tree Walks in the Arboretum on the last Monday, i.e. **27 May from 9:30 a.m.** Meet at the FONA offices beside the Girl Guides HQ. *Those who are not members of FONA or Nature Kenya pay Ksh 100/- fee on arrival at the gate.*

WEDNESDAY MORNING BIRDWALKS

Bird watching walks at sites in and around Nairobi. Meet at the National Museum car park every Wednesday at 8:45 a.m. Return about 12:30 p.m. *Those who are not members can get temporary membership at Ksh 100 per birdwalk, payable on arrival at the car park.*

ARABUKO-SOKOKE (COAST)

The Saturday birdwatch with the Arabuko Sokoke Forest Guides Association is on the first Saturday of each month i.e. **4 May, at 6:30 a.m.** from the Visitor Centre, Gede. Cost 100/- per person.

FFJ Bird Walk (Coast)

Friends of Fort Jesus birdwalks are held the third Saturday of each month i.e. **18 May, at 4:00 p.m.** Please call Marlene Reid on (011) 491 648

DECLARATION

Nature Kenya does not accept any responsibility whatsoever in respect of negligence of any of its staff, volunteers or members organising the outings/trips or for any loss, injury, death or damage to property.

APRIL DIARY

Sat 4	ASF Birdwalks
Mon 13	Annual General Meeting
Sat 18	FFJ Birdwalk
Sun 19	Sunday Birdwatch
Mon 27	Tree Walk

Birdwalks every Wednesday Morning
Bird ringing every Thursday Morning

Editor, **Catherine Ngarachu**

Bird Hotline

Please note the records below are unconfirmed

Bat Hawk *Giraffe Manor,* **Purple-crested Turaco** *Giraffe Centre Nature Trail,* hundreds of **Lesser Kestrels** and a few **Amur Falcons** *Nairobi NP/ April*
Dave Richords

Grey-headed Negrofinch, Montane Oriole, Mountain Greenbul
Castle Forest Lodge, Kimunye, Mt. Kenya/ March John Nzau, Elizabeth Maloba

110+ **Lesser Kestrels**
Nairobi NP/ March
Anthony Kiragu, Paul Donald, Dan Omolo

Brown-breasted Barbet
Mtwapa Creek/ March
Philip Hechle

Naturalist Corner continued

the pain increased until after about a minute it was very sharp, similar to the pain of soap in ones eyes.

I washed the eye far another twa ar three minutes, then stopped. It immediately started to weep copiously while the sharp pain continued, and on examination in the mirror I saw the left side was vividly bloodshot.

I washed the eye for a further five minutes, during which time the pain lessened. After this I discovered my vision was blurred, especially at the centre of focus. The eye was still weeping copiously, so fast that some of the blurring of vision may have been due to this.

Further washing did not relieve the pain, so I was satisfied that I had washed out all the venom I could. By now 10 minutes has elapsed. The pain was dull but still noticeable; eye movement and attempts

2) I managed to wash out the venom quickly. There is no doubt that if the venom was left for longer more serious effects would occur.

These two points roughly cancel each other. However, it must be remembered that even though the bulk of the venom had been washed out in 10 seconds, the amount absorbed in that time was enough to cause serious disturbance of vision. If left in for much longer, the venom would probably have caused temporary blindness.

to focus on near objects caused a rapid escalation of pain. I placed a cotton wool bandage over the eye.

After half an hour the weeping had slowed to a steady drip. The eye was extensively bloodshot - the whole of the white area was deep pink, and in the left corner were several bright red bloodshots. The pain was less intense and sharpeness of vision had returned.

By 2 pm. the pain was practically gone; five hours after the accident. A slight ache remained, only noticeable when focussing on very near objects or extreme rotation of the eyeball and the weeping had ceased. By next morning it felt completely normal. The bloodshot effect took four to five days to clear up and the bloodspots did not disappear for nearly two weeks.

The salient points of this incident are:

1) I received a full dase af venom at very short range. Most victims of Spitting Cobras receive the blast a several feet and thus get a proportionaly lower dose of venom, but
2) I managed to wash out the venom quickly. There is no doubt that if the venom was left for longer more serious effects would occur.

My advice on being spat at by one of these snakes is, if you get venom in the eye, wash it out as quickly as possible with large quantities of water. Incidentally, there is little or no value attached to the use of remedies as milk or potassium permanganate and one should not waste time on looking for these.

Please send your field notes or interesting observations to the *EANHS Bulletin* at the Nature Kenya address. Back issues of the *EANHS Bulletin* are available from the front office.